

REBELLE RALLY: A WOMAN'S TEST OF ENDURANCE, GRIT AND GOALS

PHOTOS AND WORDS BY MERCEDES LILIENTHAL

Dirty and weary, Rebelles methodically find their way back to base-camp before their time is up. Hours were spent in the searing sun while pounding miles of dirt, sand and rock. Women are hunting for hidden checkpoints scattered throughout the Nevada and California desert. Flags, poles or nothing—these hard-to-find markers will make a difference in crowning off-road rally champions.

The Rebelle Rally, a 10-day, 1,500-mile off-road competition, tests participants in ways they never dreamed of. The Rebelle Rally is only for women. This traditional navigational competition doesn't permit any GPS-finding technology, either. No cell phones, Garmin devices or laptops are al-

lowed during the rally. This map and compass-based event winds its way from the north end of Lake Tahoe, across the Nevada and California deserts, and eventually ends in the famous Glamis sand dunes flanking Mexico.

This rally has been held since 2016, with 4x4 and AWD crossover classes offered up. Two women, along with their vehicle, are capped at 50 teams. Driver, navigator and tons of stamina spill onto the trails for the multi-day adventure. Hidden checkpoints worth various points are carefully placed throughout both states. Easy-to-find greens have the biggest flags, whereas blue checkpoints don either a smaller blue flag or pole (usually a few feet

tall). Black checkpoints are invisible—making competitors rely solely on exacting navigational skills and measuring to bring them to victory.

Challenging terrain can swallow up tires or tear up clutches if teams are unlucky, but owner and founder of the rally Emily Miller says anyone can compete with a customized vehicle, but a stock crossover or 4x4 will do just fine. No matter what women drive, winning the competition is about the vehicle's capability, the competency of the driver and the exactness of the navigator. Miller believes in stock vehicles and their abilities so much so, that a bone stock class was created right from the start.

In addition to the 4x4, crossover and bone stock classes, there's an international cup award and spirit award, too. As each year brings repeat Rebelles and new competitors, it also invites updates and challenges as the rally itself evolves. New penalties and challenges were instituted last year to keep women on their toes. A wide point penalty was instituted, and

(cont'd)



Taylor Pawley plotting her next point. Green flag and blue pole checkpoints. Michelle Laframboise, Clearwater Design, Team 100. (Below) Chasing a black checkpoint.



black checkpoint misses could potentially be saved—if ralliers missed a checkpoint, they could try again and cancel out negative points.

In 2018, I was the driver of a 2012 Toyota Tacoma, and was part of Team Free Range Dames. In 2019, I returned to the event as media, hustling from one checkpoint to another before the competitors, to snap photos and catch them in action. I loved experiencing both sides of the off-road event.

The Rebelle Rally tests everything about a competitor. It's an event that challenges their physical being, emotional determination and spirit. Drivers not only have to conquer hundreds of miles of off-road terrain, they also need to practice mechanical sympathy on their rigs—penalties are given if teams require outside mechanical assistance away from base camp. Conversely, navigators need to keep drivers on point, headed in the right direction, and arriving at each checkpoint before they close. Teams also have to communicate effectively and support each other—they're locked in a steel box with each other for 10 days straight.

Why does the Rebelle Rally exist? Miller sought to create a unique competition that'd make a difference for women. She

wanted to challenge women in a meaningful way, in which only the most competent and methodically strong-minded could win. Miller, a seasoned racer and off-road instructor, worked extremely hard during her off-road tenure. She's earned several podium finishes and won races in numerous major events—being both driver and navigator.

Time management plays a critical role when competing in the Rebelle Rally. It's a topographical map of chess. Each checkpoint begs each player for its attention, only to fool them with its location. Some may be hidden, whereas others are right in front of them, but could still easily be missed.

Fatigued minds and exhausted bodies make mistakes, but keeping focused and mindful of time and location at all times is critical during the rally. Strategizing while “Rebelling” is the name of the game to win it all.

In addition to catching checkpoints each day, early morning TSD (or time speed distance) mini-rallies test each team. These “mini” competitions challenge each pair, as detailed instructions are laid out in a route book. Teams need to carefully follow turn-by-turn instructions while keeping oddball speeds, and then some, so they

can pass through time controls at their appropriate time.

Rebelle Rally is as much a mental game as it is a physical one. Starting at 5am, a single clanging cow bell wakes competitors in the dead of night. Drivers check on their rigs, load up camp and attend to their navigator's needs. Pencils scratch and headlamps bob about as navigators furiously plot points on paper maps—the air is thick with concentration. Every minute counts. Every second counts more.

Being a Rebelle means different things to different competitors. Some want the constant game of off-road distractions. Others want to prove they can accomplish anything they set their mind to. Still others find the Rebelle Rally therapeutic.

I chose to compete in the Rebelle Rally as it was a challenge—it pushed me well beyond my comfort zone. I was tested both physically and emotionally. The year I competed was a year of change: not only did I switch my career, I started off-road rallying, too. I learned to be quick, adapt, reset and keep moving. I learned it's okay to fail—it is part of growing. I grew mentally, spiritually, and after 1,600 miles of off-pavement traversing, becoming a Rebelle took me through the competition and beyond. ■



(Above, top) Nathalie Lanthier, Team 102, plots a route. Clearwater Design, Team 100, conquers Glamis Dunes in their Jeep. Joanna Chen, Team Luna, Team 107.

(Above, lower) Karah Behrend of Record the Journey, Team 207. Toyota Tacoma run by author Mercedes Lilienthal's Team Free Range Dames, Team 179, in 2018. Tammy Battistessa, Lost in Overland Team 120.

(Main photo) Rebelles are always kept busy hunting for the next checkpoint.

